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ABSTRACT

In an era in which the credibility of public schools is falling with the general public, community forensics performances by students have the potential for cultivating public awareness of the effectiveness of the schools. Forensics is intrinsically related to basic speaking and listening skills, and since there is great potential for demonstrating the tangible results of forensics instruction, forensics teachers need not feel threatened by demands for accountability or for minimum competency testing. Numerous forensics skills have been identified: one brief definition of forensics is that it is educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. Forensics teachers should establish contacts with other faculty members and with school administrators and should offer the assistance of the speech squad in a variety of school programs and instructional areas. They should also establish contacts with members of community groups. Among the activities possible for forensics students are presentations in oral interpretation, extemporaneous speaking, and debate. (GT)

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UTILIZING FORENSICS SKILLS TO ENRICH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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UTILIZING FORENSICS SKILLS TO ENRICH
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As the title of this session, "Forensics Skills and Instructional Goals," indicates, the focus of this discussion is the instructional aspect of forensics. It is appropriate that such a program should be cosponsored by the American Forensic Association, the Forensics Division and the Elementary and Secondary Education Section. Those of us who are involved or have been involved in directing competitive forensic programs refer to ourselves as "coaches" and sometimes tend at conventions to concentrate on the essions which discuss the theoretical concepts of argumentation without giving attention to our role as teachers. By the same token, those among us who teach at the elementary and secondary level outside a competitive framework often ignore the sessions which deal with forensics skills and exclude them from the instructional communication program. I hope this session will serve to remind us of our inter-relationships. Each of us must realize that the setting in which we function is an educational institution which nurtures, finances, and enhances our endeavors for one purpose - the instruction of young people.

Instruction in forensics should, then, meet the instructional goals of both the state, the local district, and the discipline of speech communication. Dr. William E. Buys and James M. Copeland, in their book, Speech Activities in the High School: A Non-Competitive Approach, indicate:

> One of the conditions of an effective school curriculum is that it relates to, serves and compliments the community in which it exists and, at the same time, that it carry forward national, cultural, economic, political and social goals.[1]

Numerous states have recently adopted instructional goals with specific reference to accountability. The call for a move "back to basics" has, on occasion caused concern among teachers in the field of forensics. By 1977, twenty-eight states had some form of minimum competency examination[2] and seventeen states now make such tests a condition of graduation.[3] If teachers of forensics have clearly defined instructional goals, and if they are able to demonstrate that those goals are being met, there is no need for them to feel threatened by accountability or by minimum competencies, for no other group of educators has so much potential for demonstrating the tangible results of academic instruction as does the forensic educator.

It is not just the individual forensic teacher's accountability which the skills acquired through forensics instruction can demonstrate. The skills which students acquire in the forensics events such as "debate, after-dinner speaking, impromptu speaking, the student congress,"[4] oral reading, and dramatic interpretation are a potential but often ignored resource by which the teacher can enrich both the school and the community in which the school exists. At no time have educators had a greater need to cultivate public awareness of the positive aspects of school than we now do.

Those of us who have "cast our lot" with the public schools are deeply aware of the falling credibility of schools with the general public. Failing bond issues, open criticism, state legislative mandates, tightened accreditation processes, shrinking budgets, and the latest Gallup Poll acclaim a lack of confidence in public

schools. A close look at the results of the latest Gallup Poll reveals some interesting things which have direct relevance to the roll of the forensic educator within the community. I want to look at a sampling of those results before commenting on them specifically.

As printed in the September issue of Phi Delta Kappan, the poll showed when parents rated the biggest problems facing public schools "poor curriculum/poor standards and getting good teachers" were among the top five. When questioned about what the schools should do to "earn an A," 17 per cent said, "set higher standards," 16 percent said, "establish a closer relation with parents." Perhaps most interesting, however, was the following comment from the poll, "Further evidence that greater involvement and familiarity with the public schools result in a more favorable attitude is to be found in the ratings given the schools by those persons who have attended a lecture, meeting, or social occasion in any local school building during the past year." In fact, the survey asked for suggestions for ways to get parents, the community, and the school to work together. Of the four most frequently made suggestions, two are especially relevant: 1. "Better communication - the local community cannot be expected to take a keen interest in the schools if people know little about them. 2. Plan special occasions - interest in the schools and in educationa could be improved. . . by inviting members of the community . . . to attend meetings, lectures, and social events in the school buildings."[5]

The skills which are taught in the forensics program have inherent in them the potential for answering the major concerns reflected in this poll. When students perform in the community and when the results of their instruction are strongly and positively utilized in the community, the charges of poor curriculum, of weak teachers, and of lack of individual concern cannot stand. In fact, Ms Flaningham pointed out in her paper at Minneapolis last year that "Forensics coaches do, however, have the opportunity to relate to students in terms of their individual needs. . . the highly personal nature of individual competition behaviors requires that students be dealt with in terms of their individual needs, skills, and goals."[6] Certainly the constant struggle for excellence, for winning, is a reflection of high standards. These concerns which undermine the public's confidence in education and which erode the financial and moral support for the programs of the school can be dealt with by the forensics educator. This individual has a vital stake in seeking creative and effective ways to use the forensics students to demonstrate the effectiveness of the local public schools.

During 1977-78, The Speech Communication Association Educational Policies Board established a task force to recommend minimal speaking and listening skills for high school students. This task force was responding to the felt need to establish all communication skills as part of the basic education for students. It carefully researched the trends already existent in many states which had competencies, standards and competency tests. It isolated four major categories of skills with which the speech communication field deals: (1)

Communication Codes, (2) oral Message Evaluation, (3) Basic Speech Communication Skills, and (4) Human Relations.[7] Of these, the skills acquired in forensics primarily fall in the last three. A careful examination of the document produced by the task force, SCA Guidelines for Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates, indicates that any talk of "back to basics" should hold no threat to the forensics teacher. However, unless forensics instructors are knowledgeable of these relationships and are utilizing their students to demonstrate publicly the basic skills which come through their instructional program, there will be no public understanding. John H. Wherry, Executive Director of National School Public Relations Association, recently challenged: "We must recognize the active role that every school employee . . . plays in providing attitude-forming information to the community."[8]

There does not appear to be any doubt that the falling public confidence in public schools has led to wide demand for better instruction and that every educator must give attention to answering and designing methods by which it can be demonstrated that a creditable job is being done in our classrooms. Too often educators tend to become either defensive or to ignore the public's concerns. Dr. Louis Rubin of the University of Illinois writing in Educational Leadership, recently warned, "Even though public expectations differ, and it is impossible to satisfy all interests, nonetheless an attempt to heed public concern and to be responsive is more beneficient than cavalier disregard."[9] He suggests that every school should have a public program aimed at identifying and satisfying parent interests. I would suggest that every forensic educator have a clearly defined

program of utilizing the forensic skills of his students to satisfy the need of the public to know that students are learning in the classroom.

Conferees at Sedalia, analyzing the many roles played by forensics educators, saw their primary role as teacher and indicated that "the primary function of the forensics educator is to teach students."[10] Brooks Quimby, writing from the vantage point of forty years as a forensics director, challenged, ". . . our salvation lies in the realization that we do. . . belong to that noblest of professions, education."[11] The American Forensic Association states in its "Debate Program and Debate Tournament Standards," that "A director of debate should seek opportunities to place his debaters and speakers before audiences in the community to speak on relevant local, state, or national issues."[12]

Although the band plays publicly and the football teams win or lose publicly, and although these activities may build a sense of school pride and loyalty in the community, it is only through the public uses of forensic students that academic achievement and the academic goals of the school can be showcased. The Chinese maxim that "one picture is worth a thousand words," might be paraphrased as "one accomplished public performance is worth a thousand negative test scores."

I have made numerous references to the term "fornsics skills" but have not yet identifies these skills. At Sedalia, forensics was defined as "educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." Further, forensics activities were defined as "laborator

for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contests with a variety of audience."[13]

A particular taxonomy of forensics does not exist, to my knowledge, in any codified form. There have been two attempts to identify specific skills which result from forensic instruction, and these are both revealing. In their book, Coaching and Directing Forensics, Donald Klopf and Carrol Lahmann cit a list of ten skills which they compiled from a survey of the literature and interviews with a number of lawyers:

1. The student learn to find and use rational and sound arguments for or against controversial issues.
2. He learns to support his arguments with carefully documented evidence.
3. He learns the fundamentals of research and how to use the results of this research to support his conclusions.
4. He develops skill in reflective thinking and reasoning, and learns to perceive the fallacious and shallow reasoning of others.
5. He learns to organize his thoughts and to present his ideas clearly and concisely.
6. He learns how to defend his ideas from the attack of others.
7. He acquires attitudes of open-mindedness, fairness, and tolerance for the viewpoints of others.
8. He develops insight and emotional and aesthetic values.
9. He gains the satisfaction that is derived from enhanced expressiveness of voice and body.
10. He develops ability to work cooperatively with other persons.[14]

The American Forensic Association has adopted a set of official principles which it recommends for teachers of forensics. These are also indicative of the kinds of skills which forensic training should develop. Specifically, this document indicates that forensics will develop skills of 1. intensive investigation of significant contemporary problems; 2. logical reasoning and the use of the best available evidence in dealing with these problems; 3. selecting,

arranging, and composing material clearly and effectively; 4. sincere and persuasive presentation of this material to the appropriate audience.[15]

Neither of these is an exhaustive list, and certainly there is need for more definitive refining of what our profession considers the forensics skills to be, but even this partially developed list makes it apparent that these are a part of the competencies identified by the SCA task force.

Forensics is basic to educational process. Those who train students in forensics activities are educators, and as educators they have a vested interest in responding to the needs of the educational profession to build public confidence. Their students have the skills which equip them to make that response. What then are the methods by which this can be done?

The suggestions which follow first appeared before adaptations in a paper co-authored by this author for presentation at the Southern Speech Communication Convention in 1974 and later published in the Georgia Speech Communication Journal. The primary focus of my concern at that time was the use of the forensic squad within the school itself. It is my feeling, however, that the rationale has now been established which should give the incentive to the teacher of forenisics to go beyond the school and into the community.

Establishing Contacts

Forensics educators are seldom unaware of the wide variety of possible aids the speech squad can offer to the school and community. However, no matter how well planned and prepared, a speech program

which is secret can hardly be useful to the school or to the community. The forensics director must inform faculty colleagues of a willingness to assist with class activities, and of the variety of programs and projects with which the speech squad may assist. Initial conferences with principals, counselors, and department heads are necessary to establish lines of communication and understanding. Administrators need to be impressed with the potential for building public confidence which students with forensics skills offer. Once the administrators and faculty become truly awre of the possibilities, there maybe more requests than can be met. Investigate and be fully aware of the goals of each department so that you will be able to offer assistance through yourself or your students in meeting those goals. Because many minimum competencies in states across the nation include listening skills such as "distinguishing between fact and non-fact, sequencing events, perception of cause and effect," these will be written in the instructional goals of reading or social studies teachers. Forensics students can offer an optional teaching strategy for working on such competencies.

Ask the principal to give you a few minutes to the opening faculty meeting. Prepare a concise statement of what you want to do, and invite interested teachers to meet with you briefly. A brochure or other printed matter can be prepared in advance, specifying those things you would be willing to do in particular disciplines. If a general announcement is not practical, ask to meet with teachers in each department during the "in-service meetings which precede the opening of school. Don't overlook the practical value of

informal conversation in the Teachers' Lounge! Inform teachers in all areas.

Information to the community is equally necessary. This can usually be achieved by written or oral communication with club presidents or active members. Often the names of such clubs and their officers are available through local organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, Newcomers' Club, or the newspaper. Teachers, administrators, and parents of speech students will probably be involved in local civic clubs, further strengthening contacts initiating in schools.

Planning carefully before the year begins can provide the forensics director with a clear calendar of activities which can accomodate both contests and community service. Since one primary goal will be to involve the community directly in the schools, attempts should be made to offer some of the community programs in the school building if at all feasible. Open forums, and interaction between adults and students will provide many opportunities.

Resource Activities

The following list of possible activities is not meant to be exhaustive. Most of them are the result of personal experiences and have been tried and proven. Some are taken from the writings of others, as noted. The real purpose of such a list is to suggest with the idea of each forensic educator devising others.

Oral Interpretation Activities: The readers prepared in oral interpretation can visit other classes and present special programs within the curricular and instructional program of the school. School assemblies and other special kinds of gatherings on campus can give an excellent showcase for oral interpretation. In

addition, oral interpreation students can give presentations at civic clubs, particularly at seasonal times. Special needs within a community are rich in opportunity for oral interpretation. Two examples which have been utilized with high success come to mind. In one community, a tape lending library for the blind has made extensive use of oral interpretation students to record short stories, poem, and even novels. Regular recording of such magazines as Time and Newsweek are also done. A program of entertainment in the community for senior citizens has also become very popular.

Extemporaneous Speaking Activities: In the community, such clubs and organizations as the Toastmasters and Toastmistresses, the League of Women Voters, and Womens Study Clubs enjoy listening to students speak on events of current interest. The actual logistics of working out drawing topics or preparing before hand will suggest themselves depending upon the circumstances. These groups will be consistently impressed with high school students who are able to organize and present speeches and the groups will serve as valuable feedback sources to the students.

Debate Activities: In other classes of the school and in the community, there will be many groups who will be interested in hearing a debate either on the national topic or on another more relevant topic for that group. In addition, if the opportunity presents itself the forensics group at the high school can sponsor public debates between college squads or through the International Debate Tour. The important thing to remember in arranging audience debates is that the debaters understand how to adapt to their audience.

When a director of forensics uses imagination and creativity, there is no end to the ways in which the forensics skills developed in students can be utilized in both the schools and the community.

If this is done, the forensics educator is meeting the needs of the students and is giving the community an insight into one phase of the modern educational experience and is fostering an appreciation for the program of the public schools. Forensics is not a "frill." It is basic to the competencies which the public values in its expectations for the public schools. As forensics educators, we have a responsibility to spotlight these skills in order to enrich both the school and the community.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William E. Buys and James M. Copeland, Speech Activities in the High School: A Non-Competitive Approach (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1967), p. 12.

[2]Educational Leadership, November 1977 (Vol. 35, No. 2).

[3]Arthur Wise, "Why Minimum Competency Testing Will Not Improve Education," Educational Leadership, May, 1979 (Vol.36, No. 8) p. 546.

[4]Don F. Faules and Richard D. Rieke, Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking, (Scranton, Penn.: International Textbook Company, 1968), p. 21.

[5]George H. Gallup, "The Eleventh Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, " Phi Delta Kappan, September, 1979, p. 33-45.

[6]Rita Rice Flaningam, "Forensics Education and Learning Theories," unpublished manuscript presented at SCA in Minneapolis, November, 1978.

[7]SCA Guidelines for Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates, pamphlet published by Speech Communication Association , Falls Church, Virginia, 1978.

[8]John H. Wherry, "Building Public Confidence in Education," Educational Leadership, May, 1979 (Vol. 36, No. 8), p. 533.

[9]Louis Rubin, "Educational Achievement and Public Satisfaction," Educational Leadership, May, 1979 (Vol. 36, No. 8) p. 537-540.

[10]J. H. McBath, ed. Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective. (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1975) p. 18.

[11]Brooks Quimby, "Is Directing Forensics a Profession?", The Speech Teacher, XII (January, 1963), No. 1, p. 41-42.

[12] "American Forensic Association Debate Program and Debate Tournament Standards for Colleges and Universities," Journal of the American Forensic Association, VIII (Summer 1971), p. 44.

[13]McBath.

[14]Donald Klopf and Carrol Lahman, Coaching and Directing Forensics, (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1967), p. 7.

[15]Faules and Rieke, p. 30.